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# Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community

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# Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community [Cornerstone Narrative with Interwoven Links to Contributions]

Part of the journal section "Forum: Cornerstone"

Curated by April Chatham-Carpenter [Interim Associate Provost of Academic Affairs] and Deirdre Bucher Heistad [Liberal Arts Core Director], "Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community, Cornerstone Narrative Followed by Contributions"

Contributions by April Chatham-Carpenter, Deirdre Bucher Heistad, Susan Hill, Nichole Zumbach Harken, Rachel Morgan, Debra Young, Susan Roberts-Dobie Gretchen Gould, Richard Glockner, Eric Lange, Emily Borcherding, Ellen Neuhaus, Dough Shaw, Kristin Woods, Martha J. Reineke, David Marchesani, and Kristin Moser.

*A positive first-year experience is the cornerstone of students' success in college, and by extension, their careers and lives. The University of Northern Iowa recognizes the importance and value of this positive first-year experience for students, and the need for the university to facilitate students' effective transition to the University by providing a variety of experiences, opportunities, and foundational skills to help them become successful students.*
-University of Northern Iowa, First-Year Philosophy Statement

[Note: This format provides the curators' narrative and description without the contributions by the various Forum participants interwoven. In the course of reading the curators' description, you may click on a Forum participant's title to be taken to the end of the document, where the text of the participant's contribution is to be found. A heading followed by a "byline" and personal name indicates that it is a link to the participant's contribution. For example, the first such contribution is "How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 1, By Susan E. Hill."]

This forum, on the First-Year Cornerstone course at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), tells the story of the creation, collaboration, community, and cultivation of learning that has developed as a result of teaching a course across various disciplines and divisions, with a longevity different from anything else that has been tried at UNI in such a vein. It focuses on the work taken to effectively cross multiple disciplinary and divisional boundaries in order to create an interdisciplinary academic course community for first-year students.

Prior to 2008, UNI had virtually no courses reserved exclusively for first-year students, and those initiatives that had been attempted were mostly co-curricular in nature. Then, in Fall 2011, 243 students, across 10 sections, became the first Cornerstone cohort. Since then, First-Year Cornerstone has increased its offerings dramatically, and in Fall 2014 saw an enrollment of 609

students across 25 sections, a feat accomplished via an intensely collaborative project in which students, faculty, and staff worked as one, towards the goal of helping first-year students succeed in college.

## Creating Cornerstone: Laying the Foundation

As the university prepared to embark on its 2008 re-accreditation cycle, some faculty and staff were asked to examine how the university was supporting first-year students. To do so, the University of Northern Iowa collaborated with the John Gardner Institute for Undergraduate Excellence, which at the time was called the Foundations of Excellence in Undergraduate Education, to do an intensive self-study of the first year of college at UNI.

As a result of this self-study, seven institution-wide recommendations were made. First, the Executive Vice-President for Academic Affairs and the Vice-President for Student Affairs set up a First-Year Council, comprised of both faculty and staff, to oversee the development of first-year initiatives on campus.

After establishing a set of first-year experience goals and outcomes that focused on community (looking inward and looking outward) and critical inquiry (academic literacy, communication, and intellectual engagement), members of the First-Year Council determined that a First-Year Cornerstone course taught by faculty, with the support of student affairs staff, library faculty members, and peer mentors, would be the next recommendation to pursue (**http://www.uni.edu/foe/sites/default/files/ex_summary.pdf**, p. 3). Members of the First-Year Council looked at best practices for such a First-Year Cornerstone course, thenset up an ad hoc committee to develop the course that would include a common read.

Since there was little support across campus for increasing the length of the Liberal Arts Core (LAC), and faculty had not been supportive of creating student success courses for credit in the past, the members of the ad hoc committee recognized the need for an innovative solution, using already-existing Liberal Arts Core classes, rather than relying on the typical 1-3 credit hour student success courses offered by many other institutions. One of the places where the ad hoc committee considered such material could be taught was in the Writing and Speaking Liberal Arts Core classes.

To achieve this, the committee imagined an integrated communication course, in which best practices for teaching first-year students could be employed. This would also encourage those students, who had not already met one or both of UNI's writing and speaking requirements with community college or advanced-placement credit in high school, to satisfy this foundational component of the LAC during their first year of college.

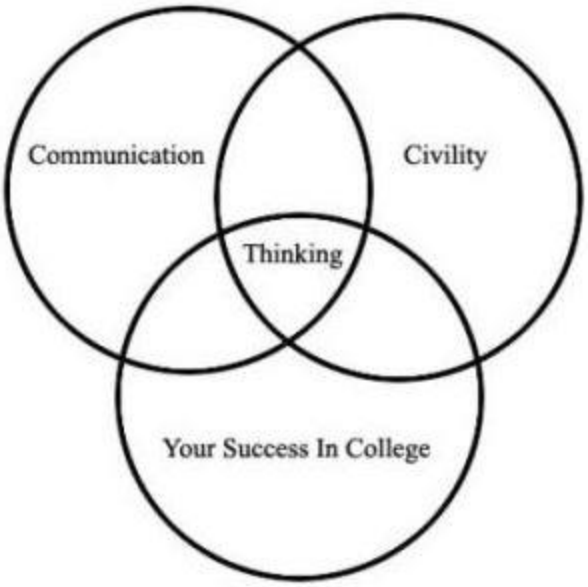
The committee had no idea whether there would be interest across campus in trying a unique way of collaborating across disciplines in teaching writing and speaking, but they went ahead and submitted their curriculum proposal to pilot Cornerstone, a two-semester integrated communication course, which would satisfy both writing and speaking requirements within the LAC. However, the current approach for teaching first-year writing and speaking at UNI and

most other institutions was to offer these courses as two separate courses out of two different academic departments (Finnegan & Wallace, 2014; Mailloux, 2000), so there was work to be done to conceptualize and develop such a course.

Faculty representatives who had also served as leaders in the Foundations of Excellence self-study, along with a member of the Liberal Arts Core Committee, were asked by the First-Year Council to provide more detail as to what the course might look like. They presented their work to the Liberal Arts Core Committee in early 2011, and the course was accepted to be a pilot alternative for the Writing and Oral Communication requirement starting Fall 2011.

A call went out inviting faculty from all colleges on campus to apply to teach the course. Ten faculty were selected to teach the course through a competitive application process, and all agreed to participate in a four-week summer 2011 workshop to further develop the course. This faculty development workshop focused on best practices and engaged learning for first-year students, the teaching and grading of writing and speaking, integrating writing and speaking assignments into the course, and assessing learning in the class.

The faculty created a common course description with three overarching course goals, as well as an assessment plan using select assignments and student surveys for measuring student learning. The course outcomes were consistent with those of Categories 1A (Writing/Research) and 1B (Speaking/Listening) of UNI's LAC, and additional outcomes were added in the areas of Student Success and Civility. The following description appeared on all First-Year Cornerstone syllabi that first year.




Each circle has both an individual and a social dimension. You can think of these dimensions as relating to both self and other.

1. Communication covers the skills individuals (selves) need to send and receive messages, but also the language, grammar, concepts and associations to words and images that allow us to

interact with each other socially. You are going to work on this goal by:
a. Composing and presenting effective written and oral messages in a variety of contexts.
b. Documenting your awareness and skillful use of effective writing and speaking processes.

2. Your success in college, at its most basic level, is your responsibility, but you can also develop strategies that can assist you in being successful throughout your college career. You are going to work on this goal by focusing on:
   a. Demonstrating strategies for succeeding in college and beyond.
   b. Working constructively in groups to solve problems and accomplish tasks.
3. Civility is embodied in your ability to interact well with others. Civility requires knowing that one's own behaviors always take place in relation to the norms, expectations and interpretations of others. You are going to work on this by focusing on:
   a. Recognizing that there are multiple perspectives and world views, and
   b. Identifying how these differences affect interactions with others.

As the faculty created common assessable assignments and discussed what kinds of scaffolding would be needed to help students meet the course's communication, student success, and civility outcomes, it became clear that this type of collaborative project would include ongoing work throughout the academic year to be sure that the end result remained true to course goals and outcomes. During the 2011-2012 school year, the faculty met weekly to discuss various aspects of the course. These meetings continued to be lively and productive. Additionally, a faculty listserv was created to facilitate course-related discussions among faculty.

While this faculty development work resulted in a successful learning experience for students, there were certainly a number of challenges to overcome. For example, the faculty would have to confront the many years of "balkanization" between two disciplines who were both invested in rhetorical education (Hauser, 2004), but who approached instruction very differently. While the outside disciplinary experts who facilitated the summer faculty development sessions reminded the UNI faculty of this historical "riff," the UNI faculty themselves began to experience it first-hand as pedagogical differences became evident. For example, small group decision-making sometimes resulted in conflict, which often followed Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) phases of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Even within this context, it is clear that faculty members did not fully realize at the time that they were participating in important "boundary crossing" work (White, 2014), in which there needed to be more focus on and appreciation of the varying pedagogical traditions of the two disciplines. Instead, as might be expected, most of the faculty were focused primarily on making sure that this first cohort of Cornerstone students achieved the shared outcomes of the course.

The next section highlights what happened, in terms of collaboration, which helped this course get off the ground. Included in the next section are contributions from several of the participants who have taught the course over the past few years. Each link provides an individual or two the opportunity to speak to this collaboration, and to the ways in which it has changed their professional lives.

## Collaboration: Making Cornerstone Work across Disciplines & Divisions

The creation of this new course required collaboration across multiple areas of the university. It was not enough for the initial ad hoc committee and founding faculty members to have a say in the course. To be successful and subsequently be added to UNI's permanent curriculum, the project would need to be collaborative, crossing multiple departments, colleges and divisions. In this way, the work to be done would involve, as White (2014) suggests, an act of "boundary crossing," during which time the faculty had to confront and work through the differences in approaches to rhetorical education that existed within the two primary disciplines of the course. In doing so, they would build a community of learners among them.

### Collaborating across Disciplines

The teaching of the course the first year was much like being in the same boat, rowing together toward the end goal of first-year students being successful. The instructors were literally creating the course, the scaffolding of concepts, and relationships with each other every week as they met together. As the faculty teaching Cornerstone worked together to develop this course, many of them found the process of collaboration beyond their home department and discipline to be at times difficult, but more importantly, enriching and helpful in their own teaching. It was this initial collaboration, which led to many rewards for the early instructors of this course. Professor Susan Hill's piece illustrates this point.

*How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 1*
*By Susan E. Hill*

There was a lot learned that first year – about teaching, first-year students, and each other. But in order to bring the course to a larger scale, there needed to be better interdisciplinary relationships built between the primary two departments who would be staffing this course in the future – the Department of Languages & Literatures and the Department of Communication Studies. To truly collaborate, the faculty teaching this course would have to bridge the split between two disciplines, which happened many years ago (Mailloux, 2000; Medhurst, 2010; Mountford, 2009). This would require more intentional exploration of the various pedagogical approaches towards rhetorical education used in both disciplines (Hauser, 2004; McGarrity & Crosby, 2012).

As illustrated in the piece below by Rachel Morgan and Nikki Zumbach Harken, by collaborating together, they learned to celebrate their varying strengths, as well as their commonalities and differences, moving into the necessary reflection and perspective-taking to incorporate helpful practices from the other's disciplines.

*To Build a Foundation*
*By Nichole Zumbach Harken & Rachel Morgan*

During the school year, the faculty met regularly to discuss teaching and pedagogy. While they often focused on the "nuts and bolts" of assignments, they also brainstormed ideas for improving the course and their own teaching. Non-writing instructors started building in teaching strategies like peer reviews (McCurrie, 2005) and literature circles (Levy, 2011), while non-speaking instructors would ask the Oral Communication instructors about strategies used to help students manage their speaking apprehension and improve their speaking over time. Many instructors contributed to an online resource library of teaching materials, which is still used when teaching the course**.**

Many of the faculty have grown to appreciate this on-going faculty development. Debra Young's piece speaks to the importance of this type of faculty sharing.

*Cornerstone Commitment to Collaboration*
*By Debra Young*

The hard work over the years to do the necessary "boundary crossing" (White, 2014) in developing this course had the added benefit of providing a new model of collaboration across disciplines, which created new (and renewed) teaching behaviors for many who participated, as seen in Susan Roberts-Dobie's piece below.

*How Cornerstone Changed my Teaching, Story 2*
*By Susan Roberts-Dobie*

**Collaboration across Divisions**

It was not just the collaboration across disciplines, however, that makes the First-Year Cornerstone course unique. It is also the collaboration with other areas across campus. This section demonstrates how incorporating an emphasis on information literacy in the course, and building the course around a common read, allowed for additional important collaboration across campus.

*Collaboration on Information Literacy*

One of the goals in both the Writing/Research and Oral Communication courses, as well as the Cornerstone course, is the increase in students' skills in collecting and using information found from credible outside sources. This focus on information literacy is one of the many things these courses all have in common. So the faculty knew, when creating this course, that the library would play a critical role in increasing students' success in college. The question was what would that role be.

Over the past few years of the course, collaboration with library faculty led to multiple engagement strategies to assure learning gains in the area of library information literacy. As seen in Gretchen Gould's piece, there have been a variety of ways to engage library faculty into

this course, ranging from a course librarian associated with each course, to intensive multiple library training sessions for students, to students working in small groups with individual librarians. Cornerstone and library faculty found that Cornerstone students experience more meaningful learning in an engaged and focused setting where the library faculty has the opportunity to work more closely with students.

## *Merging Parallels: Libraries in the Classroom*
## *By Gretchen Gould*

*Collaboration across a Common Read*

One of the most interesting collaborations in the course has been to use a summer freshman common read for Cornerstone students, in conjunction with the university's Reaching for Higher Ground (RHG) initiative (**http://uni.edu/higherground/**about). The use of a common read is considered a best practice for first-year initiatives on many campuses (cf. **http://tech.sa.sc.edu/fye/resources/fyr/summer_books_list.php**). During New Student Orientation, each Cornerstone student receives a copy of the course's common read.

Faculty members build assignments and discussions around the topic of the common read, with students required to practice their writing and speaking skills related to this topic. Focusing attention on the RHG topic for the common read provides an opportunity for the course to impact students' knowledge, skills, and values about civility, another one of the course outcomes.

In the first year, the use of *Zeitoun* as the common read gave a common experience to begin the Cornerstone class, and many meaningful connections were made to Reaching for Higher Ground events during AY 2011-12. The common reads for the next few years, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, *The American Way of Eating*, and *Ready Player One* were selected by a sub-committee of the returning Cornerstone faculty, Cornerstone peer mentors, representatives of the Dean of Students office, library, and the Reaching for Higher Ground committee, as well as other students and alumni.

Students are given the opportunity to participate in an essay contest on what the common read means to them, with the winners being chosen to have breakfast with the author of the common read and the Provost. Along with getting to hear and meet the author of the common read, the Theatre department has collaborated with the Cornerstone course to present a theatrical adaptation related to the RHG topic during each Fall semester of the course. (See Richard Glockner and Eric Lange's piece about this collaboration.)

## *Exploring Ideas Onstage: A Creative Connection*
## *By Richard Glockner and Eric Lange*

In addition to the Theatre/Cornerstone relationship, other divisions on campus have also made important contributions on this collaborative common read project, by providing opportunities for students to learn in a variety of ways. Collaborating on this project with various offices on campus allows students to attend programming related to these topics throughout the year, providing a strong foundation for their learning about civility within community. Such events provide a wealth of possibilities for follow-up discussions in the Cornerstone course, becoming a catalyst for ideas, discussion, and critical thinking for Cornerstone students. These opportunities for learning provide a powerful and thoughtful launching pad for Cornerstone students and faculty as they continue their discussions on the RHG topic and civil discourse throughout the entire school year. Ellen Neuhaus and Emily Borcherding describe this collaborative atmosphere of learning in the piece that follows.

*Another Cornerstone Collaboration:*
*The Common Read and the "Not Just Any Book!" Club*
*By Emily Borcherding & Ellen Neuhaus*

In summary, it is interesting to note that much of the satisfaction, but also much of the frustration in teaching this course, comes from the intense collaboration that is taking place. It is difficult work, but also satisfying work. The faculty seem to recognize that they are doing good work, in that they are proud of the course, but they are also quick to admit that the work is both difficult and time-consuming. However, the time commitment has become more manageable as the foundation of the course has continued to take shape and the learning community of Cornerstone is established.

**Community: Building Relationships in Cornerstone and Beyond**

A section of the original description of the First-Year Cornerstone course reads as follows:

> As part of the UNI first-year experience, First-Year Cornerstone is committed to fostering a personal and supportive environment that challenges and inspires students to actively engage in learning and reflection, develop a broader world view, be engaged citizens, and be members of pluralistic communities. Cornerstone instructors are committed to creating a welcoming and safe environment both in and outside the classroom that is sensitive to individual needs, backgrounds and experiences of all first-year students.

This description speaks to a larger mission of the Cornerstone project, which is to create a supportive academic learning community, or a group of students and faculty who intentionally gather together to collaborate on learning over multiple semesters in a supportive environment. Learning communities are a high-impact education practice known to enhance learning and increase retention (Lenning, Hill, Saunders, Solan, & Stokes, 2013). These learning communities have been built for first-year students, faculty members, and peer mentors, as seen in the sections that follow.

**First-Year Student Voices**

In end-of-year portfolio assessment data collected from students in the course, many students included comments about their positive adjustment to UNI as a result of building relationships and sense of community within the course, noting how the Cornerstone course in particular contributed to their sense of belonging in college.

- Coming from out of state not knowing a single person on campus, I was so scared. Having the same class with the same people is exactly what I needed.
- The one thing that I knew I could count on were the friends I made in Cornerstone. When I was having troubles with my ideas in the beginning, I took them to class and had others help me pick the right topic for me. If I were to have been having these troubles in any other class, I would never have taken my list of ideas to my classmates to ask their opinion. I feel that because we were able to get so close in this class, I trusted them to help me out when I needed it, and I would help them when they needed in return.
- No other class I have has the students maintain as close as connection with each other as the Cornerstone class.

Many students also commented on the fact that because the class was two-semesters long, they really benefited socially and academically.

- Cornerstone made me really open up in class. I got to know the professor and also the students and our teaching assistant very well. If it were not due to our small class size and being together all year, I would not have had the opportunity to grow as a person socially.
- Taking a first-year course like Cornerstone was a great opportunity because I was surrounded by classmates who were in the same exciting yet scary situation as I was. …Cornerstone did help me feel more comfortable coming to college my second semester because I knew I would still have one familiar class and my same classmates. …Taking a year-long course like Cornerstone was very helpful to my social life. I am much closer friends to my Cornerstone classmates than I am to my other classmates in all my other single semester classes. I will admit that I will miss "my Cornerstone groupies."
- One of the things that helped me transition into college easily was Cornerstone. In Cornerstone, I met lots of people and was able to make friends that will last far beyond the end of the class. Meeting the people in my class and going to the same room with them three times a week for thirty weeks helped me grow as a writer and a public speaker.
- The first semester of Cornerstone was just like any other class for all of us students. We might have made a couple friends that sat around where we sat, but not many were confident enough to talk to everyone in the classroom. If the class was only a semester long, that is where we would have all ended up. We would have only met a couple people and probably would not have even been that close to those we did meet. The thing that was different for us in Cornerstone was that we all knew that after the holiday break was over, we would be right back in our same seats for another semester. Personally, this took off a lot of stress because I knew that even if I did not know a single person in my other classes, at

least I would have my friends in Cornerstone. And as the second semester progressed, I had the privilege to meet even more of my Cornerstone classmates.

Clearly, something special is going on in this two-semester course, in terms of relationships and student confidence being built as a result of their participation in this class, as they receive support in multiple ways during their first year of college, in this unique two-semester long learning community.

**Faculty Voices**

What is particularly interesting in the case of Cornerstone is that the community building is not limited to the students. Many of the faculty recognized that the Cornerstone project created for them a sense of belonging, as well as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. When polled on the question of *what you see as the highlights or most positive aspects of your being part of the Cornerstone pilot so far,* 6 of 8 faculty in Fall 2011 offered an answer to the open-ended question, and virtually all of them focused on the notion of community, as seen below.

- Getting to know some of UNI's teachers from other departments. Getting to see what the writing and oral comm profs do, and gaining new understanding and respect for what they do.
- This has been an extraordinary teaching experience in terms of the collaborative teaching. Through the activity of consensus building, we explored many amazing teaching materials and pedagogy.
- I love teaching this course. …I haven't ever taught a course where I had so much support and conversation with other teachers, which I've found very helpful.
- I think there has been some good discussions about educational perspectives, and the camaraderie is always good.

The Spring 2012 faculty survey offered similar remarks. When asked whether or not the faculty were "*happy to have had the opportunity to meet faculty and others on campus that I might not have met without Cornerstone,"* 87.7% of the faculty indicated that to be *very true* and 12.5% indicated it as being *mostly true*. When asked "*What do you see as the highlights or most positive aspects of your being part of Cornerstone this year,"* several faculty spoke to the issue of community among colleagues and students.

- I think one of the greatest benefits is working together as a faculty to develop the course.
- Working with other faculty on a course and talking about teaching.
- Working in a learning community with faculty ....The learning community with the students for two semesters was good too!

Doug Shaw's piece illustrates the benefits of such a learning community on one's teaching in other classes, as faculty continue to learn to improve their teaching of first-year students, because

of participating in the Cornerstone faculty learning community. These remarks indicate that Cornerstone as a learning community for faculty is a positive attribute of this course, which merits a more thorough examination in the years to come.

*How Cornerstone Changed My Teaching, Story 3*
*By Doug Shaw*

**Peer Mentors**

As part of the Cornerstone project, a Peer Mentor program was developed and implemented, creating yet another learning community for peer mentors and first-year students. The peer mentor program connects each Cornerstone faculty person with at least one peer mentor. The peer mentors attend all class sessions, assist faculty with various course responsibilities such as grading and student meetings, and meet weekly with the Liberal Arts Core Director and Assistant Dean of Students to process the experience and discuss relevant readings. In exchange, peer mentors receive three hours of credit per semester. In her contribution, Kristin Woods describes the impact of the Peer Mentor Program.

*Course-Embedded Peer Mentor Program*
*By Kristin Woods*

Over the years, first-year students enrolled in Cornerstone have reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with peer mentors. Themes emerged indicating that peer mentors are relatable, available for assistance, and supportive both inside and outside the classroom. Some of the comments from UNI Cornerstone students from end-of-year surveys are as follows:

- I have found my peer mentor to be very helpful with overall college success because of my peer mentor's own experience in college.
- When the professor is unavailable, the peer mentor is there to help with questions and help to better understand the assignment and what needs to be done.
- [My peer mentor] not only takes an interest in our in class experience but also our lives as well. She is extremely helpful and always encourages us to contact her. She has made Cornerstone a fun place to learn and a great way to start my college career.
- I have found them both to be helpful in the way they will peer review papers, set up sessions to help go over speeches, and inform us of college overall.

Quantitative mid-term data from 197 first-year and cornerstone students in Fall 2013 also indicate students believe peer mentors are making a difference in students' lives.

The majority of those responding said their peer mentor had helped them with connecting with campus resources (70.1%), campus opportunities (65.4%), campus events (62.3%), student organizations (62%), and the university as a whole (77%). In addition, 55% of those responding said that their peer mentor had helped them in their ability to talk to professors (54.9%) and

making connections with their first-year only professor (60.2%). Almost 55% of them agreed that their peer mentor also had already helped them connect with their classmates in their first-year only class (54.6%), and 44.9% said their peer mentor had helped them deal with personal challenges. (Chatham-Carpenter et al., 2014, p. 78)

In a survey of peer mentors in Fall 2013, peer mentors talked about the importance of building relationships with their host instructors and their students. Some examples of the peer mentors' comments appear in an article by Chatham-Carpenter and other UNI staff members (2014):

- There's nothing I would change in my experience at a peer mentor, I loved getting to know so many students, help them adjust to the college experience, lead class activities and work with such a great and knowledgeable professor!
- I feel that my instructor was awesome, and I did not have any issues!! She was truly a great inspiration to me as well as the students I'm sure, and I look up to her not only in the setting at UNI but also outside of class also. I really consider her a role model and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her this year!
- I loved the students!!! I could tell that they really cared about me and that they really valued my presence in the classroom. I also loved the professor that I worked with and was very happy coming to class every day. (p. 79)

The expansion of the peer mentor programs has allowed other faculty members to experience the benefits of the community built from having peer mentors work within their classrooms. In a survey of first-year Liberal Arts Core and Cornerstone instructors, about their experiences in incorporating peer mentors into the learning experience for first-year students, faculty members provided positive feedback on the work of the peer mentors, as seen in the data reported below.

- The first-year experience program and the peer mentors is the best thing to have happened to my teaching in the past 10 years. I am completely spoiled and have my fingers crossed for two peer mentors for the coming year.
- It works, I like it, I would welcome it again. It is another layer of work for the instructor, but worth it. I think we get out of the peer mentors what we are willing to put in to them and their training.
- Students in the classroom benefit. So do the peer mentors and the instructor. I hope the peer mentors will have grown, expanded their horizons, and have an appreciation for a wider range of student issues. I hope that I am a better instructor because of them. Meeting with them, hearing their opinions, having them be the "voice" of the students, that all helps me learn to do my job more effectively.
- If every UNI student could take one class their first semester with a peer mentor in it, we could broaden their impact and also enhance faculty awareness of the needs of first-year students, enabling faculty to modify some of the ways they approach first-year students. (Chatham-Carpenter et al., 2014, p. 79)

The peer mentor program works to improve students' and faculty members' experiences. The program provides opportunities for all involved, as seen in Martha Reineke's piece.

*Peer Mentors in the Religions of the World Classroom*
*By Martha Reineke*

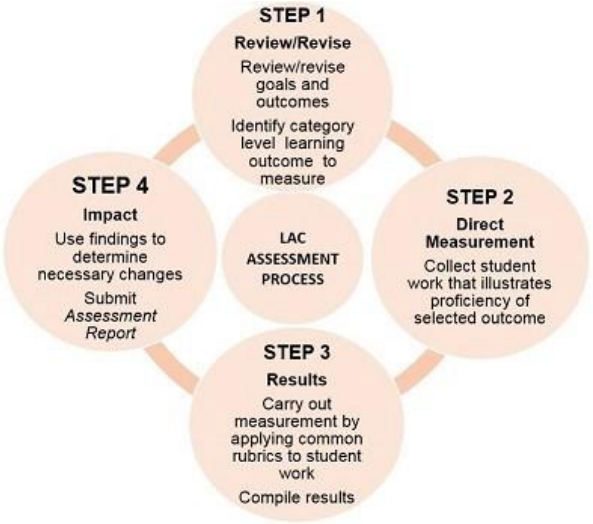
In conclusion, the Cornerstone course has provided a supportive academic learning community for students, faculty, and peer mentors, as they all collaborate in helping first-year students be successful in their first year of college.

## Cultivation of Learning:
## Cornerstone Assessment and Data-Driven Decision-Making

To evaluate the success of the Cornerstone project, a variety of different assessment tools are being used to measure competence, proficiency and overall student learning. Overall, the results are positive. The tools being used include Student Assessment of Learning Gains, MAP-Works, portfolio work samples, faculty and peer mentor surveys, census data, etc.

### Overview of Assessment Processes

Faculty in the First-Year Cornerstone course use the following LAC assessment process to ask questions about the learning happening in the course. They created the course goals and outcomes before teaching the course, and came up with both direct and indirect measures to assess student learning.




Given the outcomes-based approach used in developing Cornerstone, a culture of assessment was easily established as the faculty focused on assessing one goal at a time. At first, due to the fact that the course was proposed as satisfying UNI's Liberal Arts Core Category 1A-Reading and Writing and Category 1B-Speaking and Listening, the faculty focused primarily on

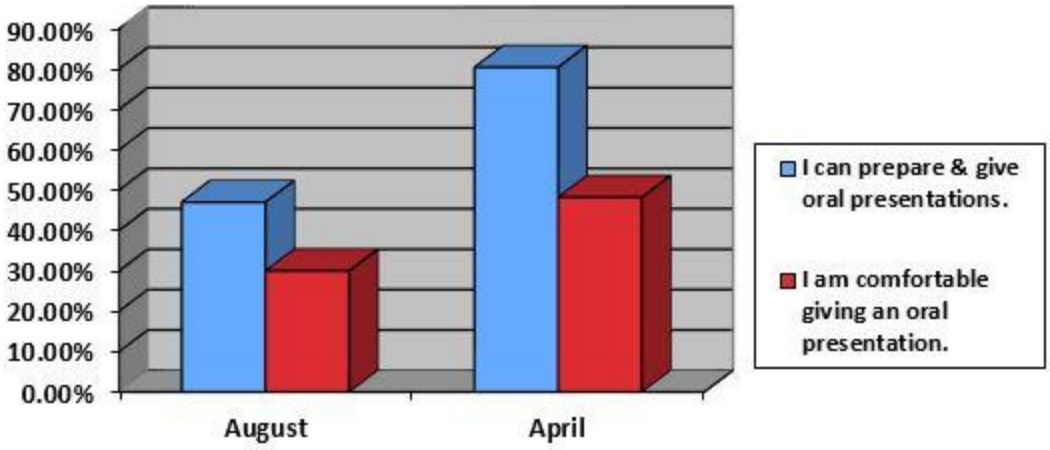
both *indirect and direct* assessment of Goal 1 (Communication), whereas in future years, the emphasis will also include Goal 2 (Student Engagement) and Goal 3 (Civility).

Both direct and indirect assessment suggests that the Cornerstone students are achieving the stated goals and outcomes of the course, but to better illustrate the types of assessment being done, examples of indirect (student survey) and direct (artifact analysis) assessment results of Goal 1 are provided below.

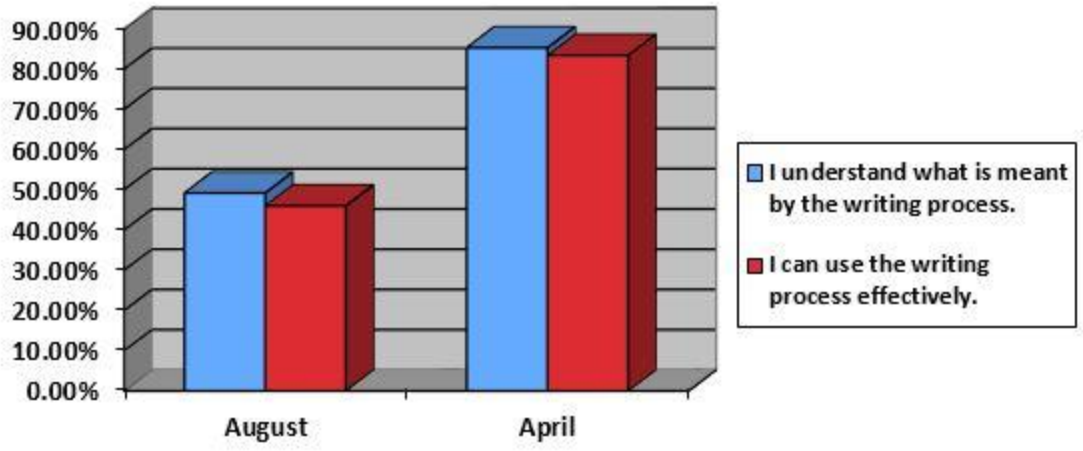
**Indirect Assessment**

Each year Cornerstone students take a pre- and post-course survey that measures their perception of learning gains. When Cornerstone students were asked to take the pre-course survey in August 2012 and a final survey in April 2013, faculty used questions developed from the previous year's survey instrument. Out of 21 total sections, there were 447 students who responded to the survey in that Fall and 327 in the Spring.

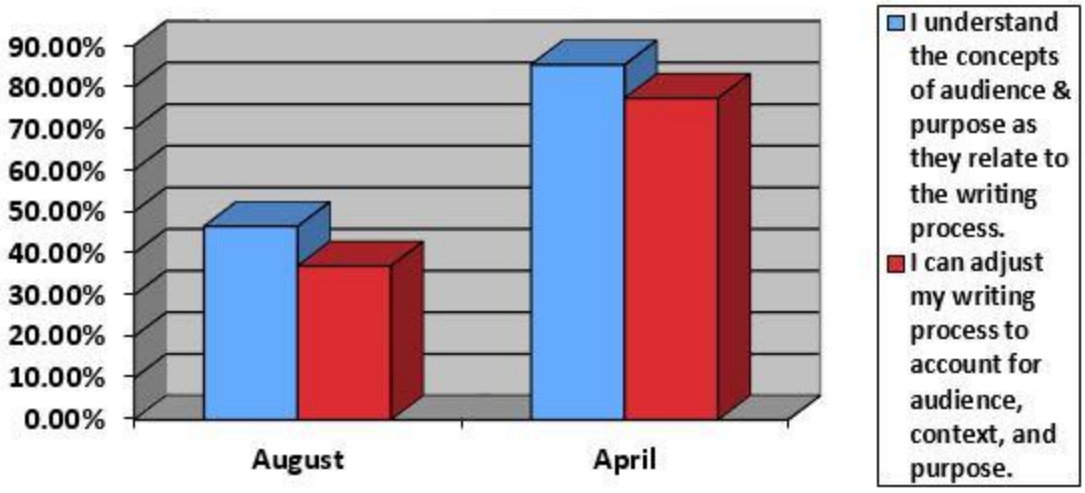
In the area of oral communication, a comparison between the August 2012 and April 2013 survey results shows an increase in the percentage of students who felt they *can prepare and give oral presentations*. In August, 47% of the students were satisfied in their ability to *prepare and give oral* presentations, while the number rose to 80% in April. In addition to an improvement in students' ability to deliver oral presentations, the results also show that their confidence level in doing so has increased, as seen below, with 30% indicating they were comfortable giving an oral presentation in August, while 48% said they were in April.




Those items on the student surveys indicating the most dramatic improvement in students' ability and understanding were items that were related to writing as a process. In August 2012, 49% of the students surveyed indicated *a lot* or *a great deal of* confidence in their ability to *understand what is meant by the writing process.* That number jumped to 85% in April 2013. Relatedly, in April, 83% of the students indicated that they could *use the writing process effectively,* whereas only 46% made the same claim in August.

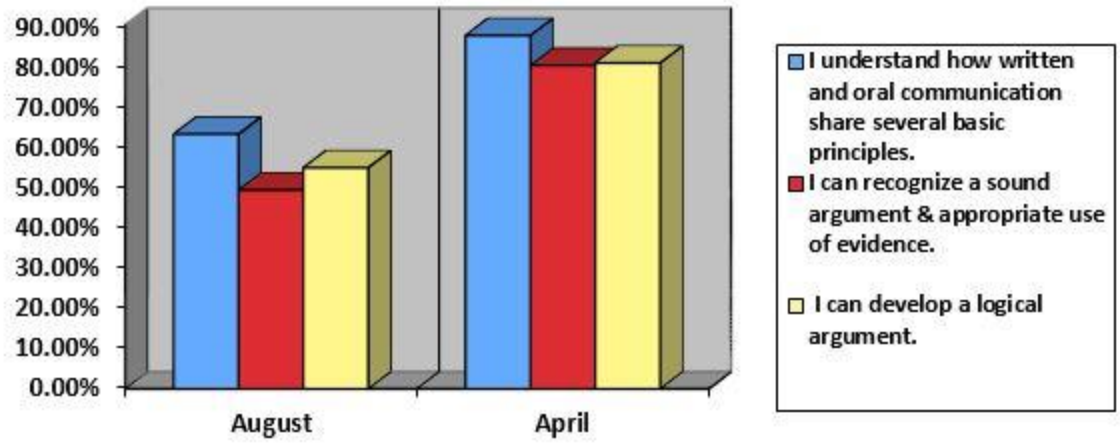



The results also show that more students *understand the concepts of audience and purpose as they relate to the writing process*, with 85% of the students responding positively to this comment on the April survey (vs. 46.5% in August). Additionally, the results show that when asked about their ability to *adjust my writing process to account for audience, context, and purpose*, those who answered *a lot/ a great deal* went from 37% in August to 77% in April.




The items on the survey related to combined oral and written communication each showed an increase in the understanding and skill level of those students participating in both surveys. These improvements are attributed to the multiple assignments related to Integrated Communication Cornerstone students completed throughout the year. Students showed improvements on several items related to integrated communication. For example, on *I understand how written and oral communication share several basic principles*, 63% of the students responded *a lot/ a great deal* in August, and 87.4% responded the same way in April. The results below also demonstrate an increase in the percentage of students who can

better *recognize a sound argument & appropriate use of evidence* and *develop a logical argument*.




Finally, it should be noted that in paired sample t-tests, means in the areas of communication were statistically improved from August to April. (NOTE: 1 = not at all, 2 = just a little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = a lot, and 5 = a great deal.) As illustrated below, Cornerstone students believe that they experienced meaningful learning gains in the areas of writing, speaking, and integrated communication.

| QUESTION | FALL MEAN | SPRING MEAN |
|---|---|---|
| ***Writing*** | | |
| I understand what is meant by the writing process. | 3.46 | 4.16 |
| I understand the concepts of audience & purpose as they relate to the writing process. | 3.36 | 4.17 |
| I can use the writing process effectively. | 3.43 | 4.19 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I can adjust my writing process to account for audience, context, and purpose. | 3.24 | 4.06 |
| I can follow a specific style manual for citations in my papers. | 3.53 | 4.07 |
| ***Speaking*** | | |
| I can prepare and give oral presentations. | 3.41 | 4.13 |
| I am comfortable giving an oral presentation. | 2.82 | 3.49 |
| I am satisfied with my ability to communicate with others. | 3.62 | 4.16 |
| ***Integrated Communication*** | | |
| I understand how written and oral communication share several basic principles. | 3.81 | 4.25 |
| I can read for more than just the author's main point. | 3.35 | 4.40 |
| I can recognize sound argument and appropriate use of evidence. | 3.50 | 4.10 |
| I can develop a logical argument. | 3.63 | 4.14 |
| ***Information Literacy*** | | |
| I anticipate making regular use of the resources of the University library. | 3.56 | 3.83 |
| I can find articles relevant to a particular problem in professional journals or elsewhere. | 3.09 | 4.12 |

**Direct Assessment**

While the indirect assessment of student learning clearly indicates that the students themselves believed that they were learning a lot, direct assessment is used to confirm these results. During the 2013-2014 academic year, for example, when focusing on the aforementioned communication goal, the faculty selected to assess two writing assignments (a rhetorical analysis and an informative research paper) and two speeches (informative and persuasive) from a number of randomly selected students from each section. The faculty then worked in groups to evaluate the student work using modified versions of the AAC&U writing and oral communication rubrics (**https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics**). For a modest amount of compensation, faculty agreed to serve on one of four assessment sub-committees – two which assessed writing samples and two which assessed speaking samples. Each of the sub-committees first practiced evaluating additional papers or speeches in order to achieve inter-coder reliability in their evaluations, using AAC&U VALUE rubrics for writing or speaking before evaluating and analyzing the collected work samples. The sub-committees adapted the rubrics to meet the goals of the individual assignments being assessed.

While each of the sub-committees provided assessment results much like the ones below, this section focuses specifically on the second and most recent writing samples collected from spring 2014. In this case, the three person sub-committee randomly assessed 21 persuasive essays collected from the spring 2014 Cornerstone sections. They sought to answer the following

research questions, which reflect the goals of the course and proficiency standards established by the faculty.

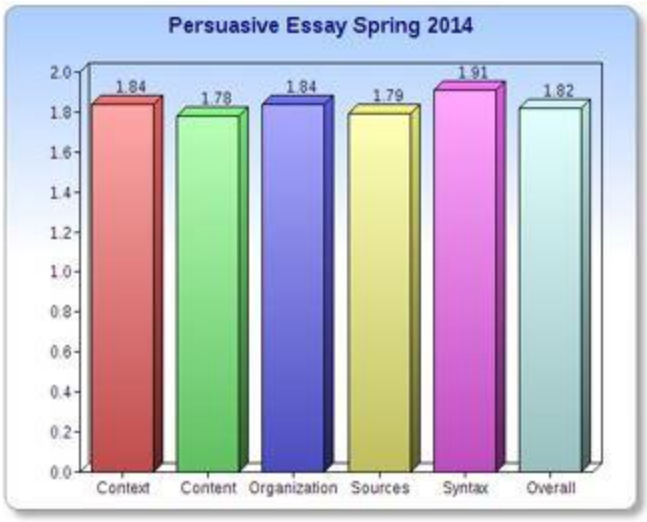
Does the work sample:

- Demonstrate *some* awareness of context, audience, purpose, and the assigned tasks(s)?
- Use appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through *at least some parts* of the work?
- Follow expectations appropriate to the writing task for basic organization, content and presentation?
- Demonstrate *an attempt* to use sources to support ideas?
- Use language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include *some* error?

**AAC&U WRITTEN COMMUNICATION VALUE RUBRIC (MODIFIED)**

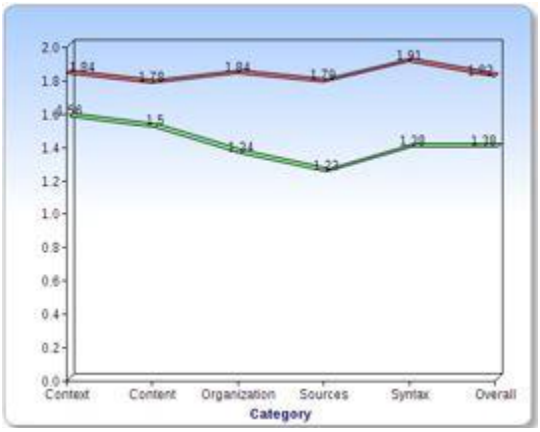
| | Capstone<br>4 | Moderate<br>3 | <br>2 | Benchmark<br>1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Context of and Purpose for Writing**<br>*Includes considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s).*<br><br>*C-stone note:*<br>*Includes thesis or statement of purpose* | Demonstrates a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work. | Demonstrates adequate consideration of context, audience, and purpose and a clear focus on the assigned task(s) (e.g., the task aligns with audience, purpose, and context). | Demonstrates awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., begins to show awareness of audience's perceptions and assumptions). | Demonstrates minimal attention to context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s) (e.g., expectation of instructor or self as audience). |
| **Content Development**<br><br>*C-stone note*<br>*Intro/Conc.*<br>*"balance among ideas/sections)*<br>*Appropriate balance of description/narration and analysis* | Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work. | Uses appropriate, relevant, and compelling content to explore ideas within the context of the discipline and shape the whole work. | Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through most of the work. | Uses appropriate and relevant content to develop simple ideas in some parts of the work. |
| **Organization** | Demonstrate detailed attention to and successful execution of a wide range of conventions particular to a specific discipline… | Demonstrates consistent use of important conventions particular to a specific discipline and/or writing task including organization, content, presentation, and stylistic choices | Follows expectations appropriate to writing task for basic organization, content and presentation | Attempts to use a consistent system for basic organization and presentation |
| **Sources and Evidence** | Demonstrates skillful use of high-quality, credible, relevant sources to develop ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing | Demonstrates consistent use of credible, relevant sources to support ideas that are situated within the discipline and genre of the writing. | Demonstrates an attempt to use credible and/or relevant sources to support ideas that are appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing. | Demonstrates an attempt to use sources to support ideas in the writing. |
| **Control of Syntax and Mechanics**<br><br>*C-stone notes:*<br>*Appropriate use of passive*<br>*Use of 1st person* | Uses graceful language that skillfully communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency, and is virtually error-free. | Uses straightforward language that generally conveys meaning to readers. The language in the portfolio has few errors. | Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers with clarity, although writing may include some errors. | Uses language that sometimes impedes meaning because of errors in usage. |

This modified AAC&U Written Communication VALUE rubric was then applied by all members of the assessment sub-committee to each paper. The faculty decided that it would be acceptable to include .5 increments in the 4-point scale. The following table shows the results.




A preliminary analysis of the results led faculty to make the following observations:

- Minimal acceptable proficiency was determined to be 1 point on the 4 point scale. The sub-committee felt that this was the minimum acceptable proficiency for the final draft of a paper written by a first-year Cornerstone student by the end of the second semester of the course.
- The results indicate that the overall average of the assessed papers was 1.82. The sub-category in which the students achieved the highest overall rating was Syntax and Mechanics with an average score of 1.91. Three of the five sub-category scores came in at 1.84 for Context/Purpose, 1.84 for Organization, and 1.79 for Sources/Evidence. The lowest score was 1.78 for Content Development, and this score was not significantly lower than the others.
- All of the scores are higher than those reported the previous semester (fall 2013), when the same rubric was used to analyze randomly selected student rhetorical analysis papers. In the visual below, spring 2014 is represented with the red line and fall 2013 is represented with the green line.




Then, in the final section of the report the team made the following observations and recommendations.

- The assessment team was not surprised by the overall results. The assessment team expected to find the scores higher at the end of spring semester compared to fall semester, which would reflect a higher level of proficiency after an additional semester of study. The committee did discuss the different assignments which faculty assigned for the persuasive project: persuasive essays, advocacy projects, call to action statements, and research and wondered how the different types of assignments affected the scores. The committee discussed whether or not it would be helpful to view the assignment in conjunction with the student artifact. One of the twenty-one writing samples was deemed below benchmark in the sub-category of Sources/Evidence, but the sub-committee felt this sample was not indicative or representative of a deficiency in the teaching of Sources/Evidence overall, since it was only one paper which was deficient.
- The committee noted that often portions of essays were more informational or research-based instead of persuasive, hence the lower overall score on Content Development. To better understand the nature of this perceived deficiency, we recommend that the Cornerstone faculty as a whole carefully discuss a persuasive assignment's content development and consider how we connect persuasion and argument to critical thinking.
- While the overall papers were deemed proficient, the assessment team invites the faculty of the whole to consider the following observations when discussing these assessment findings in relation to the overall assessment of the course.
    - While the sub-committees expected higher scores in the second semester, the committee remarked on the more informational rather than persuasive tone of the essays. The committee is interested in seeing students grow beyond presenting "strings of information" and would like faculty to discuss their expectation of a persuasive assignment and how to teach students how to better make a persuasive argument with data.
    - When Content Development is compared across both semesters (fall 2013 and spring 2014), Content Development is the second highest in fall 2013, but the lowest in spring

2014. Faculty need to consider how connections to persuasion scaffold through smaller assignments so that students are prepared to develop their information as it applies to their position.

- Future assessment sub-committees may find it helpful to look at the assignment in conjunction with the student artifact.

While the first example illustrates how student surveys have provided us with indirect assessment data, the second example demonstrates how faculty in the course use authentic student work to measure students' actual proficiency on outcomes of the course. Once all of the direct and indirect assessment data is gathered, the reports are then taken to the entire Cornerstone faculty where it is discussed, in order to determine what changes need to be made in the teaching of the course and/or in the assessment methods.

One of the ways in which direct assessment data has been used to improve the course came a couple of years ago when faculty realized that students' comfort levels in giving speeches could be benefitted from providing more low-stakes speaking assignments throughout the semester, something they were then able to incorporate the following year. Another area in which faculty sought improvement was in the area of organization and having a specific thesis. As a result, pedagogies changed and assignments were tailored to work more specifically on these things.

This process of assessment has made curricular data-driven decision-making possible in the First-Year Cornerstone course. In this way, faculty have learned to "close the loop" on assessment, which has led to course improvement.

In the end, it is obvious that the Cornerstone faculty are not only interested in what their students are learning in the course, but they are collaboratively working on bettering the course to improve students' learning. Constant and meaningful assessment has played an important role in the initial development and on-going improvement of Cornerstone.

While the first goal of assessment is to make sure that the course is achieving the stated goals and outcomes, such assessment can also lead to conversations concerning university-wide expectations of students' competencies by the time they graduate. The university faculty as a whole needs to ask whether or not a senior student's writing proficiency looks different than a sophomore's writing proficiency. If the answer is "yes," then there needs to be university-wide discussion on exactly how faculty are intentionally and consistently moving students towards these higher levels of writing proficiency in other classes.

If at the end of their freshman year, students can "demonstrate *some* awareness of context, audience, purpose, and to the assigned tasks(s)," wouldn't it be reasonable to expect them to "demonstrates *a thorough understanding* of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s) and focuses all elements of the work" by the time they graduate? Or in the case of content development, if a student enters his/her sophomore year being able to "use appropriate and relevant content to develop and explore ideas through *at least some parts* of the work," couldn't university faculty expect the student to be able to "use appropriate, relevant, and

compelling content to illustrate mastery of the subject, conveying the writer's understanding, and shaping the whole work" by graduation?

The fact is that many faculty do indeed expect a higher level of proficiency by a student's senior year, and yet, the path that allows these students to move in this direction is murky at best. While assessment can help us identify and locate this problem, the solution lies beyond one writing course, whether it be Cornerstone or College Writing and Research. If universities are serious about improving students' proficiency in writing, institutions must take this assessment data seriously, use it to inform efforts at improving writing across the curriculum, and stop relegating the teaching and learning of writing to one first-year course. What these assessment efforts say more than anything else, is let the discussion begin!

## CONCLUSION: Lessons Learned

Using data to drive decision-making is a good strategy to use when deciding whether to start and continue new initiatives. The First-Year Cornerstone course was developed as a result of an intensive self-study of the first year of college at the University of Northern Iowa, a study in which the data showed there were areas of gap where we could better serve our first-year students. In the following piece, David Marchesani and Kristin Moser describe how the university has continued to collect information on the various initiatives coming out of the Foundations of Excellence self-study, including but not limited to Cornerstone, in order to make data-driven decisions.

### *Using Data to Expand Programming on Campus: Data Driven Decision-Making and Institutional Collaboration in First-Year Only Courses at UNI*

*By David Marchesani & Kristin Moser*

During the creation and implementation of Cornerstone, there was always the nagging question of sustainability. While resources were available and certainly served as an incentive for faculty to participate in the development, implementation and piloting of Cornerstone, it was clear that course's sustainability would depend on the commitment and on-going collaboration of Cornerstone faculty and staff. The challenge would be to sustain a highly collaborative, interdisciplinary, cross-divisional course within a context where teaching collaboratively is not rewarded, curricular territorialism is the norm, and where a student's transition to college is often seen as beyond the scope of classroom learning.

While the First-Year Cornerstone course has been successful, inherent to this innovation remains a level of fragility, the fragility and uncertainty that comes with those projects that do not conform to the current university structures. With that in mind, faculty and staff must continue to work toward institutionalizing such projects while assessing their worth both within and beyond the university. In the end, what has been learned is that the future success of this interdisciplinary project will forever depend on the collaboration and commitment of a large number of university faculty and staff, who are not afraid to cross over boundaries and create transformative practices between them.

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